

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

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CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

USSAG NAKHON PHANOM

13TH ADVON UDORN

AMCONSUL UDORN

COMUSMACTHAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 13699

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: MARR, TH

SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL MOOD TOWARD US MILITARY AS PHASE-DOWN BEGINS

STATE PLEASE PASS WHITE HOUSE FOR KISSINGER

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

1. IN THE WAKE OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF PLANS FOR INITIAL REDUCTIONS IN US AIR FORCES IN THAILAND, WE HAVE ATTEMPTED TO ASSESS THE MOOD AND PROBABLE FUTURE ATTITUDES OF THE VARIOUS SEGMENTS OF INFLUENTIAL THAI OPINION AND THE POWER STRUCTURE. WE COME UP WITH A BROAD SPECTRUM WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE MOVED SIGNIFICANTLY TOWARD MODERATION AND GRADUALISM, BUT STILL REMAINS SUBJECT TO THE CONFLICTING PRESSURES OF NATIONALISM, ECONOMIC FORCES, AND VARYING INTERPRTAT-
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IONS OF NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS. THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPHS REVIEW OUR ESTIMATE AS OF THE END OF AUGUST, 1973.

2. PRESS. THE US PRESENCE REMAINS A MAJOR NEWS STORY IN THAILAND.

THE AUGUST 24 ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE SCOPE OF INITIAL WITHDRAWALS WAS PLAYED STRAIGHT ON LOCAL FRONT PAGES. THE NON-CONTROVERSIAL NATURE OF THE ACTION WAS REFLECTED IN TWO EDITORIALS: THE NATION COMMENTED ON THE ECONOMIC IMPACT AND THAI DAILY STATED THAI DESIRE THAT GI'S BE WITHDRAWN SO AS NOT TO BRING WAR TO THAILAND. PRIME MINISTER THANOM'S PRESS CONFERENCE AUGUST 29 WAS DOMINATED BY QUESTIONS REGARDING FURTHER WITHDRAWALS, WHICH RECEIVED PROMINENT COVERAGE, REFLECTING CONTINUING IMPORTANCE TO THE THAI PUBLIC. THE BANGKOK POST NOTED THANOM'S CONCERN FOR SECURITY AND ECONOMY OF THE COUNTRY, BUT COMMENTED THAT "IT IS GOOD THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS PREPARING FOR A FUTURE WITHOUT AN AMERICAN PRESENCE IN THAILAND (SIC). WE NEED TO LEARN TO BE SELF-RELIANT AGAIN".

3. ALTHOUGH THE INITIAL WITHDRAWALS LED TO A BRIEF PAUSE IN PRESS SPECULATION, AND SHIFTED THE FOCUS SOMEWHAT TO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ADDITIONAL MILITARY AID OR GIFTS OF SURPLUS MILITARY EQUIPMENT, THE PRESS IS UNLIKELY TO BACK AWAY FROM ITS SEARCH FOR HEADLINES ON THE US PRESENCE, WHICH THEY ALWAYS SEE AS A NEWSWORTHY STORY. WE BELIEVE THE NATION, WHICH IN THE WEEKS BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT LED THE PRESS CAMPAIGN, USED INFORMATION LEAKED TO IT BY THE FOREIGN MINISTRY. THE VERNACULAR THAI PAPERS AND COLUMNISTS PICKED UP THE ISSUE AND USED IT TO NEEDLE THE GOVERNMENT.

4. FOREIGN MINISTRY. EVIDENTLY FEELING THAT THE PRESENCE OF US FORCES HERE WAS A HINDRANCE TO THAILAND'S WORKING OUT LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS WITH ITS NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, PARTICULARLY IN THE ASEAN CONTEXT, AND ALSO DOUBTING THAT US FORCES WOULD REALLY BE COMMITTED TO COMBAT ON BEHALF OF THAILAND'S SECURITY, THE FOREIGN MINISTRY TOOK THE LEAD IN BRINGING THE TROOP-REDUCTION QUESTIONS TO THE FORE.

5. IN PART THIS IS AN EXPRESSION OF FOREIGN MINISTRY RESENTMENT AT HAVING BEEN BYPASSED BY THE SUPREME COMMAND IN MAKING THE ORIGINAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR STATIONING US FORCES HERE. OTHER FOREIGN MINISTRY MOTIVES WERE A FELT NEED TO EXPRESS THAI SOVEREIGNTY BY TAKING THE INITIATIVE ON WITHDRAWALS, AND THE (SINCE DISPROVED) BELIEF THAT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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FIRST STEP TOWARD ACCOMMODATION WITH THE PRC MIGHT BE HAMPERED BY US MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAILAND. MAJOR GENERAL CHARTCHAI CHUNHAWAN, AS DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER, GOT THE EAR OF THE PRIME MINISTER ON THIS, AND THE PRESS CAMPAIGN HELPED TO CEMENT THE RTG POSITION THAT BORDERED ON AN OUTRIGHT DEMAND THAT WE REDUCE OUR FORCES.

6. NOW THAT WE ARE PAST THIS INITIAL HURDLE, THE FOREIGN MINISTRY MAY RELAX A BIT BUT ITS GENERAL PREDILECTION WILL PROBABLY BE TO KEEP UP THE MOMENTUM OF THE WITHDRAWAL. CHARTCHAI'S POLITICAL AMBITIONS, HOWEVER, MAY CAUSE HIM TO SLOW DOWN THE MINISTRY'S EAGERNESS ON THIS QUESTION IF HE SENSES THAT THE MINISTRY IS GETTING TOO FAR OUT AHEAD OF THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP. ADDITIONALLY, SOME SENIOR FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS HAVE QUITE RECENTLY BEGUN

EXPRESSING THE OPINION PUBLICLY AND PRIVATELY FOLLOWING INTENSIVE DIS-

CUSSIONS AT VARIOUS LEVELS WITH US MISSION REPRESENTATIVES, THAT A CREDIBLE US MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAILAND IS NECESSARY TO DISCOUR-
AGE NORTH VIETNAM FROM MILITARY ADVENTURISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

7. RTG MILITARY LEADERSHIP. THE ATTITUDE OF THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP OF THE GOVERNMENT THUS BECOMES THE CENTRAL FACTOR IN DETERMINING WHETHER THE RTG WILL PRESS FOR CONTINUING WITHDRAWALS FASTER THAN WE WISH TO MAKE THEM. BASICALLY THIS GROUP IS LESS CONFIDENT THAN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY THAT REGIONAL ACCOMMODATIONS CAN BE WORKED OUT, AND ITS CONCERNS LIE MORE WITH THE PRESENCE OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY IN LAOS AND CAMBODIA. ALSO, BECAUSE OF MANY YEARS OF ASSOCIATION WITH US, THE MILITARY LEADERS ARE MORE WEDDED TO THE IDEA THAT US MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAILAND IS A SECURITY GUARANTEE FOR THAILAND. THEIR CONFIDENCE HAS BEEN SHAKEN, NO DOUBT, BUT THIS DOCTRINE HAS BEEN A BASIC PART OF THEIR WORLD-VIEW FOR YEARS AND THEY DON'T WANT TO GIVE IT UP. THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP IS ALSO FINDING ITSELF BESET BY PROBLEMS OF GOVERNMENT WHICH DEFY EASY SOLUTION AND THREATEN THE CONTINUANCE OF THEIR DOMINATION, INCLUDING INFLATION, SUPPLY OF RICE, STUDENT UNREST, AND THE TROUBLESOME AND GROWING INSURGENCY. THE AMERICAN PRESENCE HAS PROVIDED A CONVENIENT WHIPPING BOY, WHERE GOVERNMENT PRESSURE FOR REDUCTIONS PARALLELED THE POSITION TAKEN BY THEIR CRITICS.

8. NOW THAT WITHDRAWALS ARE BEGINNING, THE LEADERSHIP IS FACED WITH THE LIKELIHOOD OF INCREASED UNEMPLOYMENT, LOSS OF FOREIGN EXCHANGE, AND REDUCED LEVERAGE IN THE EFFORT TO SECURE MORE US AID,
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WHICH IS UNDOUBTEDLY MAKING THEM TAKE A SECOND LOOK AT THE POSITIVE VALUES OF THE AMERICAN PRESENCE. EVEN THE OPPOSITION PRESS HAS BEGUN TO COUNT THE ECONOMIC LOSSES, AND WE HEAR MORE TALK OF GRADUALISM COMBINED WITH THE CALLS FOR THAILAND TO STAND ON ITS OWN FEET FREE OF THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGN TROOPS.

9. MILITARY OFFICER CORPS. THIS GROUP IS A BASIC POLITICAL CONSTITUENCY SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT AND THUS THE MILITARY LEADERS MUST PAY ATTENTION TO ITS VIEWS. THE MAIN MESSAGE THE LEADERS ARE GETTING FROM THE CORPS CURRENTLY IS DISSATISFACTION OVER WHAT THE MILITARY INTERPRETS AS A DRASTIC CUT IN US MILITARY ASSISTANCE, WHICH IS ONE REASON WHY THE LEADERS ARE PRESSING US FOR ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT IN WHAT THEY SEE AS THEIR LAST CHANCE TO DO SO. ON THE SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US, MOST OF THE CORPS HATES TO SEE US GO AND WISHES WE WOULD STAY. HOWEVER, THERE ARE ELEMENTS IN THE CORPS THAT QUESTION WHETHER IT WAS A GOOD IDEA FOR THAILAND TO LINE UP SO WHOLEHEARTEDLY WITH THE US. FOR THE TIME BEING THIS IS VERY MUCH A MINORITY VIEW, BUT THE MILITARY LEADERS WILL BE WATCHING IT, AND SO SHOULD WE.

10. OTHER RTG CIVIL AGENCIES. THESE AGENCIES, SUCH AS CUSTOMS AND REVENUE WILL NO DOUBT CONTINUE SNIPING AT VARIOUS ASPECTS

OF OUR MILITARY PRESENCE. BECAUSE OF SOME DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP, THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP DOES NOT PROTECT US FROM THESE ATTACKS AS IT USED TO, AND THE CIVIL AGENCIES WERE QUICK TO SENSE THAT OUR PROTECTORS HAD LOST THEIR ZEAL. PROBLEMS IN THIS AREA WILL CONTINUE AND COULD GET WORSE IF THE AGENCIES FEEL THAT MILITARY LEADERS ARE BECOMING MORE DISENCHANTED WITH OUR PRESENCE.

11. INTELLIGENTSIA. THIS DIVERSE GROUP, INCLUDING THANAT KHOMAN, KUKRIT PRAMOJ, AND SOME POLITICANS AND UNIVERSITY TEACHERS, IS HARD TO PREDICT. THESE INDIVIDUALS TEND TO OPPOSE THE REGIME ON MULTIPLE ISSUES, AND COULD RETURN TO MAKING PUBLIC STATEMENTS THAT WE SHOULD WITHDRAW. THANAT CAN BE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE TO PLAY A NEGATIVE ROLE FROM OUR POINT OF VIEW.

12. STUDENTS. IN RECENT WEEKS STUDENT LEADERS REFRAINED FROM JOINING IN THE CHORUS THAT RECOMMENDED WE START WITHDRAWING; APPARENTLY THEIR ATTENTION WAS TAKEN UP BY OTHER QUESTIONS. WE THUS CAN HOPE THAT THEY WILL CONTINUE TO ACCORD THE MILITARY PRESENCE
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QUESTION LOW PRIORITY UNLESS IT HEATS UP GRATELY AMONG THE INTELLIGENTSIA AND THE PRESS.

13. IN SUM, WE FEEL THAT THE AUGUST 24 ANNOUNCEMENT HAS ALREADY DEFUSED THE MILITARY PRESENCE QUESTION TO A CONSIDERABLE EXTENT. AS THOSE REDUCTIONS GRADUALLY TAKE PLACE OVER TIME AND ARE BROUGHT TO PUBLIC ATTENTION THERE IS A REASONABLE CHANCE TO KEEP POLITICAL STEAM FROM BUILDING UP ON THE QUESTION FOR SOME FURTHER TIME. A LATER JOINT ANNOUNCEMENT OF A FURTHER GRADUAL REDUCTION OVER AN EXTENDED PERIOD IS THEN RECOMMENDED; THIS WOULD STATE THAT US FORCES WILL BE REDUCED GRADUALLY OVER A SPECIFIED PERIOD TO A LEVEL WHICH WOULD THEN MAINTAINED TO PROVIDE A STRONG POSTURE ADEQUATE TO ASSURE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PEACE IN INDO CHINA.
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